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AUTHOR Ellis, W. E.
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ABSTRACT

This presentation discusses the products the South Carolina Department of Education derives from that State's management information system and traces the processes used to deliver those products to local school districts. Emphasis is on a description of the technical assistance the State department of education provides the local school district in helping it utilize data for management decisionmaking purposes. (Author/DW)

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Presented by

Dr. W. E. Ellis, Director
Education Products Center
South Carolina Department of Education

to the
Symposium, Division H
6.14
Data Derived Through Automated Management Information Systems As A Basis For Decision-Making

Chair: James Swanson
Florida Department of Education

Participants: Ronald Luckie
Georgia State Department of Education

James Swanson
Florida Department of Education

William J. Brown, Jr.
North Carolina Department of Public Instruction

W. E. Ellis
South Carolina Department of Education

Discussants: Emmett Kohler
Mississippi State University

Thomas D. Clemens
National Institute of Education

Wesley Apker, Executive Secretary, National Association of State Boards of Education

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UTILIZATION OF STATE-PROVIDED DATA FOR DECISION-MAKING PURPOSES

AT THE LOCAL DISTRICT LEVEL

Educational practitioners and researchers have too long dwelt upon discussing the meaning of investigative studies which were based on theories and generalizations. In such a discussion, there is little concern for the application of the results and findings of the studies. Rather, much emphasis is placed on the knowledge produced and on the credibility of the methods used in producing the new concepts. Such an approach is not designed to have an immediate effect upon the world of the here and now, or upon the world in which the educational practitioner lives and moves.

In the American education system, the delivery of educational services and opportunities to boys and girls is primarily through the local school and the local teacher. The involvement of local school districts in meaningful activities designed and operated to significantly improve the educational performance of students, therefore, is critical. Local education agencies are becoming increasingly aware of this need and are beginning to become more involved in this type of activity.

Our schools cannot keep up with the lives they are responsible for sustaining and improving unless all concerned are continuously examining what they are doing. Imagination must be used creatively and constructively to identify practices which methodically and systematically produce evidences which can be used to test the worth of current practices. In order to implement a system which would move the product of research into the realm of practicality and action, the concept of "applied research" was formulated. More recently, the word "applied research" has been given several other titles, a very common one

being "action research." "Action research," according to our definition, is based upon the immediate application of validated findings, not on the development of theory. Emphasis must be placed on solving real problems in local settings.

James Coleman, the John-Hopkins sociologist, describes a variation of "action research" which he refers to as "policy research." Policy research is defined as the research of problems which originate in the world of action and the findings that are destined for that world. The research effort is to produce valid information which may be used as a base for decision-making. Coleman talks about a system of management or decision-making based upon the best available data. He emphasizes that a steady accumulation of results may aid policy decisions much more effectively than a single complete result produced at the end of an exhaustive study. Coming up with an adequate, effective answer to a defined problem is what counts, not the elegance of the research design. In local educational agencies and, to a large extent, in state educational agencies, research must be based on the action format and designed to provide information by which policy statements may be formulated. In this kind of definition of "research," there is no question but that the local school districts will and must become increasingly involved.

Mechanisms for this kind of local research are being developed. Local educational agencies make a tragic mistake if they leave educational research efforts and activities to state and federal agencies and to colleges and universities. Local educational agencies should not only be the source of the specifics to be studied, but should also be the first to benefit from the results. This can be achieved by the LEA gaining first access to documented alternatives which they may use to improve the educational opportunities provided for the students they serve.

Educational needs in one section of a state do not necessarily reflect educational needs in all sections, just as alternative methods of instruction in one school district may not be effective and acceptable alternatives for use in another school district. Each school district, therefore, must develop a mechanism to be able to identify the policy statements necessary to provide effective educational alternatives suited to meet the needs of its particular students.

In South Carolina, as in most states, a host of information based on fairly precise definitions and collected for specified purposes is becoming available to state and local educational decision makers. Aggregations of such information and data are being analyzed at the state and federal levels and are being used to formulate policy decisions affecting the total system of education. Local educational agencies, therefore, must in turn analyze the same data base to determine the applicability of the data at the local level. For example, if the needs of students as reported by the state and federal agencies do not reflect the needs of students at the local level, then the school district must be able to document the extent to which the characteristics of its students differ from the characteristics presented as being descriptive of state and federal populations.

Data that enter the South Carolina Department of Education's Basic Educational Data System (BEDS) becomes useful to local school districts only if it is immediately applicable to real problems in local settings and valid for assistance in decisionmaking. To insure that data entering BEDS, as well as data entering any other future South Carolina data collection systems, is accurate and applicable, cooperative efforts must occur among local, state, and federal agencies. However, and most importantly, local districts must become heavily involved in determining the kinds of statistical

and narrative data that is to be entered into a state data system if that system is to be accurate at the state level and if the same data is to be used to meet planning and decisionmaking needs at the LEA level.

In 1970, the South Carolina Department of Education became one of three state education agencies in the nation to develop and operate a pilot program for information dissemination. The pilot program, which was funded by the U. S. Office of Education for a period of three years, tested the concept that (1) the State education agency is the appropriate agency to collect and disseminate educational information to facilitate educational change within the State and that (2) an educational extension agent provides an efficient means for facilitating the effective use of information.

The program emphasis from 1970 to 1973 was on the development of an effective product and an efficient process to encourage the use of the product. The major item produced was an information packet. The packet contained summaries from a computer search of ERIC documents (RIE) and CIJE journal articles, as well as a bibliographic listing from Education Index and from sources available through the State Library system. During this period, 3030 requests for program information and data were processed by staff personnel.

When federal funding was terminated in 1973, State funds were appropriated to operate the unit with a reduction in staff. The mission of the unit was to assist educators to utilize information at key points within the planning and/or decisionmaking processes and by providing alternatives for decisionmakers. Although the work of our extension agents had proven to be quite effective, the cost of maintaining such a network was considered to be prohibitive for our State. In turn, the activities which the extension agents identified as being useful in providing data for decisionmaking purposes had, to a meaningful

extent, been maintained in the Department by assigning these functions to existing personnel.

The Department, in July 1974, combined components of the Office of Research and the Office of Planning and Dissemination to establish a new office, the Education Products Center. The Center is designed to serve as the Department's major resource for dissemination and utilization of educational information and data. The new office is comprised of three components:

1. Survey Section, whose principal function is to conduct surveys of district educational programs in order to identify strengths and weaknesses within the system being studied and report recommendations for improvement.

2. Production Section, whose functions include:

   a. establishing quality standards for the production of educational products originating with the Department of Education.

   b. providing professional and technical assistance to Department of Education staff in the production of educational products.

   c. maintaining capable, efficient production of and quality control over those educational products which originate within the Department and are assigned to the EPC.

3. Development Utilization Section, which is responsible for coordinating and assisting in the development of new products designed to meet user needs and to assist the districts in achieving maximum utilization of the products available from the Department of Education.

The mission of the Center is linked closely with the cited purpose of the Division to strengthen and support management functions by devising products geared toward areas of critical need and designed to enhance planning and decisionmaking activities at the local level.

The Education Products Center administered a Product Needs Assessment Inventory in August 1974, to identify state and regional product needs. Results of the inventory indicated ten to fifteen critical statewide interest and need areas. In addition to the inventory, incoming requests are used as indicators of priority school district interest areas.

In assisting school districts to utilize educational products, a series of 11 mini-meetings was held with superintendents between September and October, 1974, to:

1. Focus on the increasing amount of educational data available from the Division of Administration and Planning.

2. Determine how and in what manner the data can be made of value to local school districts in planning and decisionmaking.

3. Obtain specific feedback concerning how existing and future data can be made more applicable to LEA needs.

4. Receive a commitment from the District Superintendent to designate one or more staff members to serve as representatives of the district and to attend a series of regional workshops which will be designed to give technical assistance in the acquisition and use of Center products.

To date, seventy school districts have named representatives for this purpose.

A series of workshops involving the local district management personnel was held in late 1974 and in the early months of this year to: (1) examine the utility of Center products; (2) determine any needs for revision or development of new products; (3) determine how districts are utilizing existing products, and identify potential ways in which the products might be used.

This effort, hopefully, will establish a series of developmental steps and linkages by which information representatives will determine how the delivery of technical assistance to LEA's should and will evolve.

The initial workshops held with school district personnel led to the realization that other agencies and institutions operating in our state also had need for educational data relating to the school districts. Evidence suggests that as accurate and useful information concerning district operations became available to other agencies and institutions, such as the

South Carolina Education Association, colleges and universities, the governor's planning office, the Employment Security Commission, and so forth, avenues toward additional resources which could be used at the local level opened up. The original objective for the 1974-75 year was to place emphasis on the dissemination and utilization of products from only one of the three divisions in the Department of Education, namely the division of Administration and Planning. However, as the effort became visible, the other two divisions requested participation by using the mechanisms being established to enhance the distribution and utilization of products being produced in those divisions. At this point in time, the emerging system is becoming a closely coordinated one, designed to deliver information generated from the Department of Education, and ultimately from state government, which have impact on the management of school districts. Such information will be delivered to the district management teams in a format designed specifically to provide maximum utilization of the data. Obviously, the effort is only beginning. The items presented to date, through this mechanism, have been management data as reported through Basic Education Data Systems; employment data as reported through the Occupation Information Systems, jointly supported by the Employment Security Commission, the governor's office, the Budget and Control Board, and other agencies; and curriculum data, such as Alternative Approaches to Early Childhood Education. Data reporting the performance level of pupils is scheduled for delivery through this system next month. A more extensive listing of the products emerging from this system is available for your review. One additional point we want to emphasize: from the very beginning, our activities have been in close cooperation with the South Carolina State Library system, which supports this effort beautifully and totally. The original ERIC file was bought by the Department through a federal grant and has been maintained by the State Library. We are currently placing three to five copies of everything we produce in the State Library, which in turn makes this

information available to the general public. The State Library is developing a process which will result in the placement of a copy of our products in the Library of Congress. We also are attempting to send our publications to ERIC Central to be considered for inclusion in that file. The continuing and growing cooperative relationship between the State Library and the State Department of Education is one of the truly significant assets of this system. Similar arrangements are slowly evolving with the State Statistician's Office, in the Budget and Control Board, in state government, and with other significant agencies.

There is much evidence to suggest that school districts in this state are beginning to make conscious decisions based on available data, and not on intuitive judgment. While the use of information cannot be cited as the only factor involved in decision making, one must note that two years ago we had numerous bond elections and millage referenda go down in defeat. However, more than thirty elections were held last November for either bond approval or millage increases. Significantly, every one of these issues was decided affirmatively. Again, the use of information was not the only factor, but certainly a contributing one in this changing climate so evident in our State.